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How to cite:

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Chapter 6

The Distins as manufacturers

Introduction

Previous chapters have shown how the brass band movement developed in nineteenth-century Britain as a result of a number of influences but principally because of revolutionary brass manufacturing techniques. This chapter aims to discuss the reasons for the advent and massive growth of the Distin Manufacturing Company and its effect and influence on the developing brass band community, and on brass instrumental development, and makes comparisons with other manufacturers of the day. It also identifies key issues where the innovations made by the Distins were crucial to brass band evolution. Distin manufacturing started (around 1850) on a small scale and grew to be the biggest instrument manufacturer in Britain, then (in 1868) the company was sold to Boosey who went on to be a world leader in the production of musical instruments. Today, the majority of instruments in brass bands are products from this same company.

Eliason and Farrar maintain (in Grove) that it was the acquisition, by Distin, of the British agency for saxhorns that was the key factor in the development of the amateur brass band movement¹ and while this may be true, the relatively short operational period for the agency between 1846 and 1851 is only part of the story. Sales of saxhorns during this five year period were relatively small compared to the thousands of instruments sold by the company since that time, and it is my view that sales of saxhorns during the period were only a small contributing factor in the development of brass bands. However, considering the evidence presented, there can be little doubt that the flourishing brass band movement that exists today, owes its origins to the initial collaboration between Sax and Distin. While the volume of instrumental sales was massive, still the most important influence came from the Distins themselves; their various strands of activity within the brass band world combined to

¹ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27 March 2008).

weave a stronghold on almost every aspect of banding, and providing saxhorns for a short period was only a small part of their contribution.

Most brass players, today, have a fascination with the mechanics of their instrument. They have to know how to service it, clean it, oil it and generally take care of it otherwise it might easily fail to operate properly, and some musicians take their interest in their instruments much further than simple, regular servicing and become repairers or even manufactures. Dennis Wick is a good example of this entrepreneurial ambition. When, as first trombonist in the London Symphony Orchestra around 1960, he became dissatisfied with the mute he was using he searched for a better one, but because nothing existed, he designed and made his own. Copies of this mute were made, and when the demand grew he went into business with an instrument manufacturer to produce them by the thousands that are now used around the world. Wick's experience with mutes led him to designing and manufacturing brass mouthpieces, which according to his advertisement have achieved sales of two million, and furthermore there is, now, a whole range of his products for general sale world-wide.

A similar parallel may be drawn to the innovations made by the Distins. John Distin started playing on the bugle and made some improvements to it, then, increasingly, he, and the other members of the Distin Family, experimented with various brass instruments even after they adopted saxhorns. The family set up a firm in order to act as sole suppliers of the saxhorns but found they could diversify fairly easily by selling other instruments and equipment and they would often import brass instruments and stamp them as their own. The self-proclaimed inventor of the brass band competition, Enderby Jackson, designed a logo for the Distins which they used to stamp their instruments²:

² A sales brochure (from the Distin enterprise in Philadelphia) belonging to the author has a hand written note by Enderby Jackson, stating he designed the logo in December 1877.



Figure 45: Distin logo and stamp designed by Enderby Jackson
Source: Sales brochure belonging to the author

When Henry Distin took over the family firm in 1849 they started manufacturing (brass mouthpieces at first) and soon developed a huge catalogue of instruments³. By the time Henry Distin sold the business (in 1868) he had sold many thousands of instruments to bands around the world, and this huge volume of sales had a considerable effect on the developing brass band movement. The Distins ‘indeed influenced greatly the world of instrument manufacture and the explosive growth of brass bands during their lifetime’⁴ but to explain the significance of this influence we need to examine the detail of the Distin contribution within an overview of brass instrument manufacturing at that time.

Distin experiments with brass instruments

Here, in order to be comprehensive, a short review of the brass instrumental development to this point in history is needed in order to locate and contextualise the Distin influence. In 1830 the most common brass instruments in use in Britain were:

- Natural trumpet and the slide trumpet.
- Natural horns with various crooks for use in different keys.
- Bugle and keyed bugle
- Ophicleides of various sizes and pitches.
- Slide trombones (sackbuts)
- Serpents and bass horns
- Helicons or circular basses.

³ See Appendix C. *Distin Musical Instrumental Catalogue* 1857.

⁴ Farrar, L. P. and Myers, A. *Henry John Distin*, Paper given at the Galpin Society Conference on Musical Instruments, Oxford, London and Edinburgh, 7 August 2003.

Besides natural trumpets, which played on the harmonic series, the bands in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century also had keyed instruments, notably the keyed bugle and the ophicleide. Keys were applied to a range of brass instruments which, with their new chromaticism, became a popular in Britain and France. Early brass bands consisted of natural trumpets, horns, and these keyed instruments but then, around 1820, came the application of the valve which gave a revolutionary, new facility to brass instruments, in fact the arrival and application of valves, according to Herbert, was ‘one of the most important single inventions ever applied to music.’⁵ With this revolution in technological advancement of brass instruments, hundreds of manufacturing companies sprang up in Britain and abroad to supply the demands of the bands and musicians; and the Distin Company became one of the biggest and one of the most important.

Distin brass instrument depot and franchise with Sax

Following the Distin Family performances in Paris in 1844 and their subsequent meeting with Adolphe Sax, the Distins adopted a set of five saxhorns and also made an agreement with Sax to be the sole distributors of his instruments in Britain. Around the same time the brass band as a medium started to become a popular working-class activity in Britain (as discussed in Chapter 1) and the Sax-Distin relationship came at a moment in British history when social, demographic and economic conditions provided a new and fertile market for these instruments.⁶ As a response to a nationwide demand the Distins commenced selling printed music⁷ from their London residence 6, Foley Place, Great Portland Street under the name Distin and Sons and soon after, they bought new premises at 31, Cranbourn Street, Leicester Square⁸ and started trading in musical instruments;^{9,10} although Rose

⁵ Herbert, Trevor, ‘The repertory of a Victorian provincial brass band’ in Trevor Herbert, *Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.17.

⁶ Bate, Philip, Herbert, Trevor and Myers, Arnold. ‘Saxhorn’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 4th October 2006)

⁷ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

⁸ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

⁹ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. ‘Distin’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 9. October 2007).

¹⁰ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

describes the premises as a small musical-instrument shop¹¹ (and Mitroulia and Myers claim¹² that the address was Manchester Street, Manchester Square, London). The Distin establishment, having acquired the exclusive franchise agreement with Adolphe Sax, became the depot for saxhorns. However, the actual date for formalising this agreement with Sax is unclear and while Eliason and Farrar give¹³ the date as 1844 and Bates, Carse,¹⁴ Langwill, Mitroulia and Myers state that it was 1846¹⁵ they may all be in error if we accept the evidence from a poster from October 1845 which announces: 'The Messrs. Distin are Sole Agents for this instrument, of whom registered Sax Horns are to be had.'¹⁶ Another poster announcing a Distin Family concert in Edinburgh,¹⁷ supports the 1845 date, and declared that the Distins were supplying 'Registered Sax Horns, Sax's improved Cornet-a-pistons and Sax's Improved Clavicor', but it is possible that the Distins, having made a verbal agreement with Sax in 1844 felt justified in trading as sole-traders and franchise holders before a formal contract was made. On January 1st 1845, less than two months after returning home from their trip to France, Distin registered a design for a Sax-Horn with the Design Act of 1843 (BT45/2/345)¹⁸. Clearly, John had ambitions for the family firm to be more than simply a repository and a supplier of Sax's instruments, but considering the fact that Distin and Sax were in the process of forging a business agreement, this strategic action by Distin, was unwise (towards securing a long-term relationship with Sax) and even unethical. Furthermore, both announcements above imply that the Distins were claiming registered patents on the whole saxhorn family as their own; a controversial claim which caused confusion to many and offence to Adolphe Sax. The instruments sold by the Distins from their depot were not only saxhorns or other instruments from the Sax factory in Paris

¹¹ Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen*. (London: Bingham, 1895), p.222.

¹² Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, 'The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874'. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

¹³ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27th March 2008).

¹⁴ Bate, Philip, *The Trumpet and Trombone An outline of their history, development and construction*. (London: Ernest Benn Ltd. 1966), p.164.

¹⁵ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

¹⁶ See Appendix A for poster dated Wednesday October 15th 1845.

¹⁷ See Appendix A for poster dated 1845.

¹⁸ See 6.5 below.

including saxophones¹⁹: ‘Distin sold instruments made by other makers often *as* saxhorns much to the displeasure Mr. Sax.’²⁰

Soon after 1846 several companies began producing their own versions of ‘saxhorns’ and often these firms imported brass instruments and simply put their own stamp on the instruments. Some firms even made copies of the designs and sold them as their own. Unfortunately for Adolphe Sax, copyright law on designs and patents were in an early stage of development and could not provide him with protection. Patent laws were inefficient and ineffective up to the middle of the nineteenth century in Britain until The Patent Office was established by the Patent Law Amendment Act of 1852. This new law completely overhauled the British patent system, laid down simplified procedures for obtaining patents on inventions and offered protection to inventors and innovators. However, it was the quality and efficiency of Sax’s instruments, and (according to Eliason, R. and Farrar), ‘the acquisition by Distin of the British agency for them, that were the key factors in the development of the amateur brass band movement.’²¹

Despite the potential profit to be made in selling saxhorns, the Distin family decided to dissolve their business partnership and made the following press release on November 27th 1848:

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Co partnership between John Distin, Henry John Distin, William Alfred Distin, and Theodore Distin, of No. 31, Cranbourne-street, in the county of Middlesex, Music and Musical Instrument Sellers, under the style-or firm of Distin and Sons, was this day dissolved by- mutual consent.

-Dated this 27th day of November 1848

... John Distin. Henry John Distin. William Alfred Distin. Theodore Distin.²²

This decision was probably made as a consequence to the recent demise of both Ann Matilda (John Distin’s wife) and son George, and in anticipation of their forthcoming year-long concert tour of

¹⁹ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

²⁰ Scott, Jack. *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

²¹ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. ‘Distin’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed March 27th 2008).

²² *London Gazette*, November 28th 1848.

America, and on their return from the US, in October 1849, Henry Distin took over the responsibility of the former family firm as we see from the advert below:

The Musical Instrument Business is now carried on by Henry Distin, at the depot, 31, Cranbourn street, Leicester Square, where an immense stock of sax horns, tubas, saxophones, cornets &c. by Besson, Courtois, and other makers, is always on sale; also Distin's newly improved Cornet, with which beginners may produce a fine tone with great ease by the aid of Distin's newly constructed mouthpiece.²³

Henry Distin's new firm still held the franchise agreement with Adolphe Sax as sole agents for saxhorns at this time, but he branched into manufacturing immediately the ensemble had returned from its concert tour. At first Distin made only mouthpieces but soon, with considerable innovative and entrepreneurial vision, began to produce brass instruments. Some of these instruments were similar in design to Sax's saxhorns and naturally, Sax became dissatisfied with the Distin agency and the number of 'counterfeit Sax Horns',²⁴ as he called them that were being manufactured by Distin and other firms. He considered that Distin had breached their agreement by copying, manufacturing and distributing similar brass instruments and also calling them saxhorns. Who could blame him, especially when one considers the amount of criticism and legal action he was facing in France for infringement of copyright on patents, and so in 1851, Sax transferred his franchise to Scipion Rousselot of Rousselot and Co. (and then later to Rudall, Rose and Carte in 1853). Sax was annoyed, quite understandably, with the Distin Company, for failing to honour their agreement, but several other companies were also making their own versions of 'saxhorns' at this time, including Rudall, Rose Carte and Co., and so Distin was being no more disloyal, nevertheless, the conflict provoked a robust exchange of letters in the *Musical World* a few years later (see chapter 5)²⁵.

By 1851 Adolphe Sax had developed a large catalogue of instruments and at the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, which was held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, from May 1st to October 15th 1851, he displayed 85 instruments and received the Council

²³ *The Times*, October 15th 1849, p.3.

²⁴ *The Musical World* June 1853.

²⁵ *The Musical World*, January 23rd 1845, p.41.

Medal²⁶ for the most successful exhibition of brass instruments.²⁷ Henry Distin also exhibited a range of brass instruments at the same exhibition including his version of saxhorns and consequently incurred the anger of Adolphe Sax who immediately annulled his franchise agreement. However, despite this disagreement, some authorities maintain that the Distin-Sax association was completely complimentary and mutually beneficial and consequently their combined influence on the British brass band movement should be viewed as a lasting memorial to them all.²⁸ My own view is that Henry Distin betrayed the trust that was implicit in his franchise agreement with Adolphe Sax and did, in fact, produce and manufacture ‘counterfeit’ saxhorns, and it may be observed that, following the annulment of the agreement, Distin was eager to avoid the name Sax in his catalogues and advertising, and he directed attention to his own designs and instrument models, and immediately stepped up production and promotion to compete with the Sax instruments.

Distin manufacturing

While the number of performances of the Distin Family brass ensemble, in fact, increased after its 1844 tour, a new objective can be seen from various reports, towards private enterprise with the manufacturing and selling of instruments. Henry Distin, writing later in life, admits: ‘[I] was, by that time, desirous of settling down in London as a manufacturer of brass musical instruments, and with a view to that, employed all [my] spare time going about with an interpreter among all the makers of Paris, seeing their instruments and learning all he could about their manufacture’.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid.,

²⁷ Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 20.

²⁸ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

²⁹ Distin, Henry. ‘The Famed Distin Family’, *The New York Times*, August 7th 1881.

Distin's saxhorn

The Distins returned from their concert tour of France and Germany with their saxhorns and almost immediately Distin (probably John) registered a design for a saxhorn on January 1st 1845, which was nine months before Sax took out a patent *his* saxhorns (French patents no. 2306, 13th October 1845).³⁰

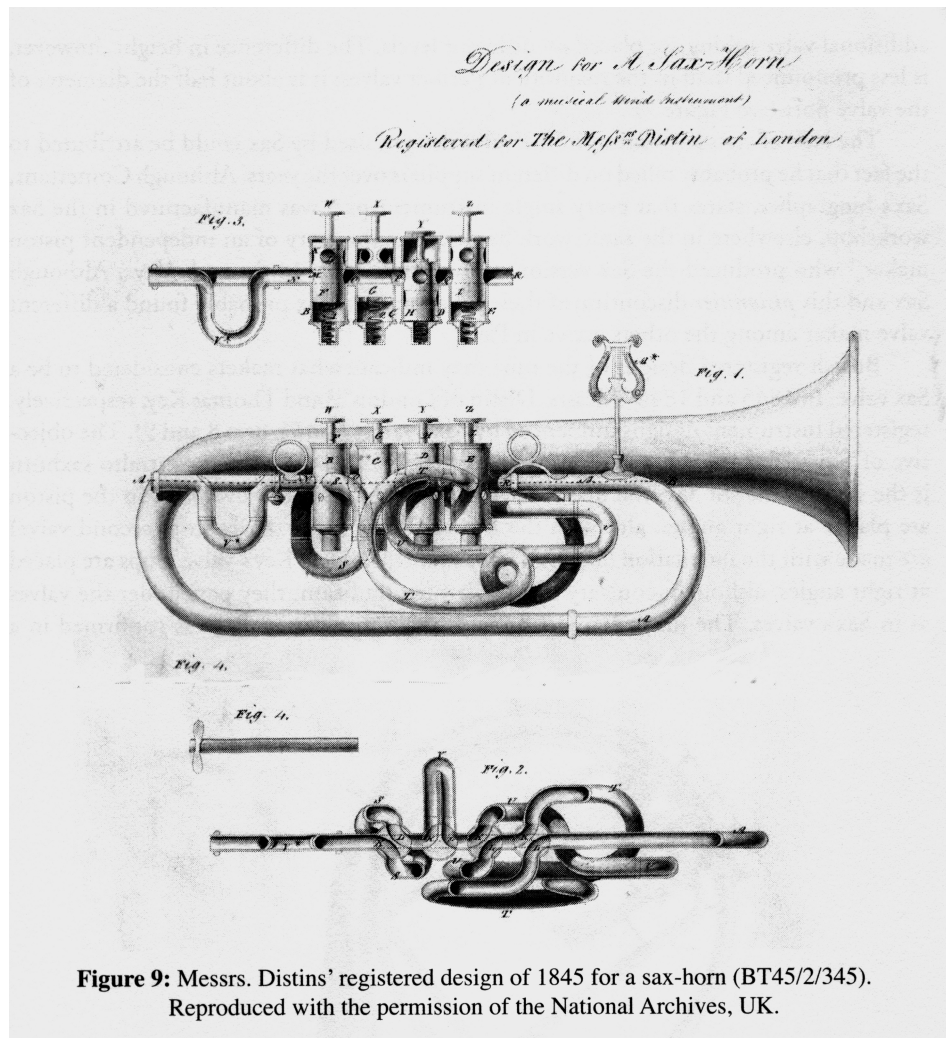


Figure 46: Extract of Distin's saxhorn patent registration
Source: The Scottish Music Review Volume 2, No 1 2011.

The instrument's design, shown above, is very similar to the one seen in the famous picture by Charles Baugniet³¹ of the Distins and their saxhorns made in 1846, which is held by Henry (shown below), except that it has an extra 4th valve and a lyre.

³⁰ Haine, Malou, *Adolphe Sax (1814-1894) His life, his work and his musical instruments*. (Brussels: Editions of the University of Brussels 1980).



Figure 47: Distin saxhorn

Source: From picture by Charles Bagniet Leader and Cock of New Bond Street, 1846.

By taking this action, Distin gave a strong indication that he, and the family, were planning for a secure future after performing as a brass group, and this may have been a sound decision when no other security existed. The saxhorn depot was based at 31, Cranbourn Street, Leicester Square³² and an advertisement from April 1847 shows further detail: ‘Distin’s cornets, three, four, and six guineas. Distins’ registered Sax horn and Sax tubas’,³³ and an earlier advert from 1845 states: ‘Distin’s Registered Sax Horns are for sale’.³⁴ Should there be any ambiguity about the word *registered* then an advert from December 1847 distinctly shows that the Distins are advertising their own *patent* saxhorns: ‘Distin and Son’ musical repository, 31, Cranbourn street, Leicester square, the only house in London for Distin’ Patent Sax Horns and Sax Tubas’.³⁵

Patent law at that time did not prevent the Distins from importing instruments from manufacturers such as Courtois³⁶ and, of course Sax, registering them, and claiming these instruments as their own. By today’s standards of business practice, this appears dishonest and unethical. However, while the Distins often stamped imported instruments with ‘Distin and Sons’ and claimed

³¹ Published by Leader and Cock, of New Bond Street. 1846.

³² *The Times*, June 26th p.4.

³³ *Ibid.*, April 30th 1847, p.1.

³⁴ *The Scotsman*, November 12th 1845.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, December 13th 1847, p.3.

³⁶ *The Times*, September 30th 1847, p.9.

them as their own patent, the Sax instruments were mostly stamped: ‘Adolphe Sax et Cie./à Paris/for DISTIN and Sons/31 Cranbourn Street’³⁷ which, to some degree, exonerates the actions of the Distins at least before 1849.

Distin’s mouthpieces

At first the company made only cornet mouthpieces, and Jules Levy relates that when he was a boy, he learned to form his embouchure for cornet-playing by practicing on a mouthpiece alone which another boy in Distin’s employ stole and gave him.³⁸



Figure 48: A Distin cornet mouthpiece
Source: Mouthpiece belonging to the author

Naturally, when Henry Distin established his new firm in 1849 there was change of name from ‘Distin and Sons’ to ‘Henry Distin’ (although Horwood gives the date for the change of names as 1862³⁹) and the business, which was still known as a depot,⁴⁰ began to expand its catalogue with the manufacturing of brass instruments.

³⁷ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

³⁸ *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

³⁹ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

⁴⁰ *The Times*, December 16th 1850, p.1.

The success of the Distin Family, even as a brass quartet (i.e. not a quintet), was extraordinary and by 1850 the group had already given an estimated 10,000 concerts,⁴¹ but by now business was blooming in the instrument retail trade, based in part on the reputation as a performing brass group and because brass bands were ‘springing up all over Britain’,⁴² and demand for band instruments was high, the Distins greatly reduced their concert appearances.⁴³

Distin’s instrument brochure of 1850

In 1850 Henry Distin published a one-page brochure with illustrations of his instruments which he claimed to be manufacturing:

⁴¹ Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

⁴² Herbert, Trevor, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bands: The Making of a Movement’, in Trevor Herbert (ed.), *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p.7.

⁴³ Scott, Jack. *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

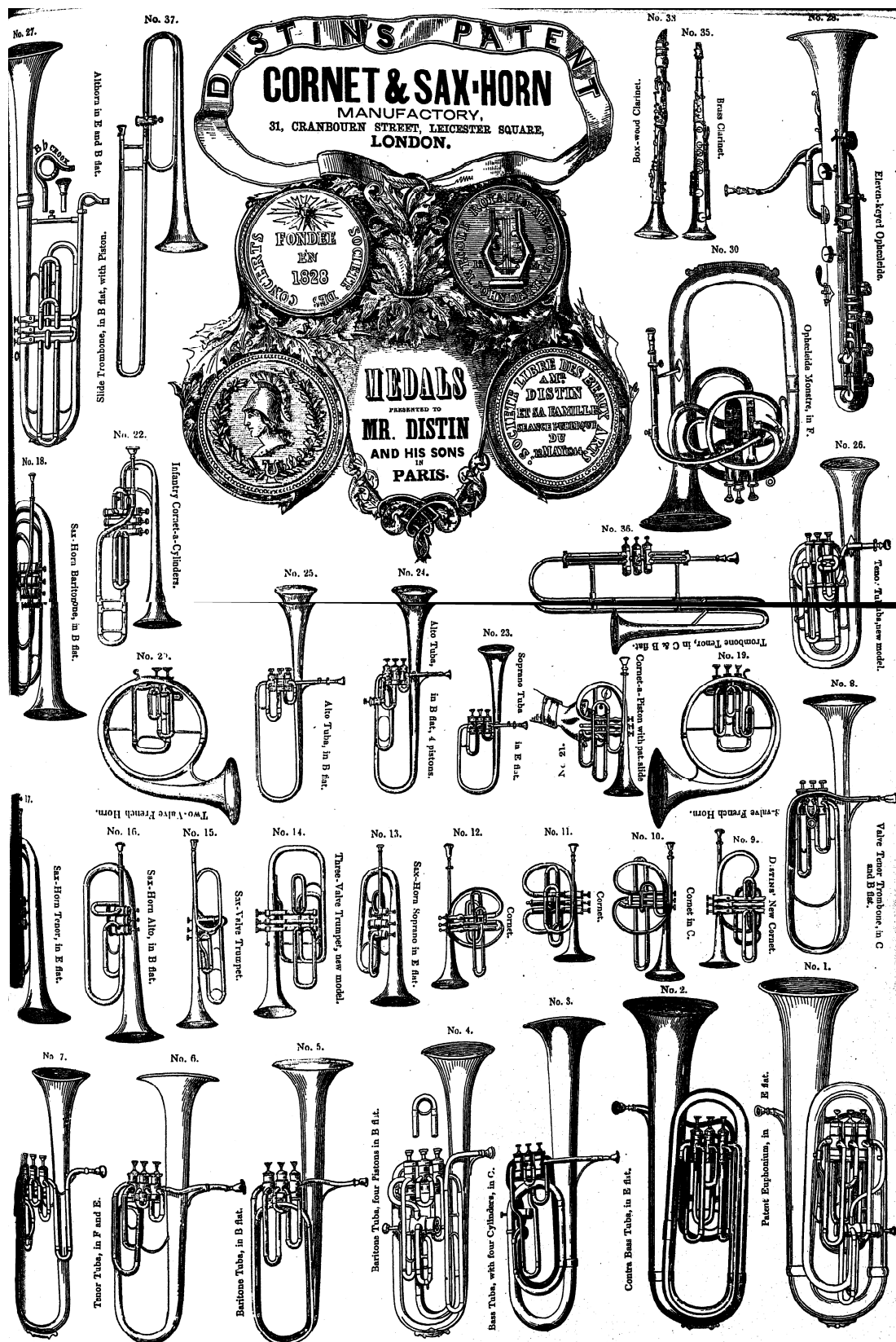


Figure 49: Distin instrument brochure from 1850c.

Source: British Library

There are many questions and issues which arise from this catalogue or brochure, but of special interest is the heading which states ‘Distin’s Patent Cornet and Sax-Horn Manufactory’. Distin is describing the instruments illustrated (including saxhorns) as his own manufacture (not simply imports) and his own patent, and these illustrations of instruments and their names and descriptions deserve a thorough investigation by an organologist; however, for the purpose of this dissertation an overview is given. Also controversial is the announcement on the front cover of the Distin Complete Catalogue of Military Musical Instruments etc. of 1857, which states that Henry Distin is the manufacturer, inventor and perfecter of all the instruments in the catalogue. It is my contention that Henry Distin, having lost the Sax instrument franchise agreement, set about manufacturing a range of brass instruments, often copies of Sax instruments, and did all he could to avoid the name Sax. Distin’s company, with its huge range of instruments, became the leading brass instrument manufacturer in Britain, and in this position was able to influence brass band development at a crucial stage of its development. In order to achieve this, Distin found weaknesses and loopholes in the British patent system and exploited the situation. We have seen how British patent law was in its infancy in nineteenth-century Britain and how it varied from country to country without crossing borders, and gave no protection or enforcement on behalf of inventors such as Adolphe Sax, but to his credit Distin was not simply a manufacturer of counterfeit instruments, he was also an innovator, in that he took other inventors’ ideas and developed them to satisfy demands or to create particular markets such as the patent taken out on a saxhorn in 1845, and other such patents which are shown in Appendix D.

The next section of the chapter takes an overview of some of the Distin ‘inventions’ and focuses on a number of instruments which were particularly important to brass band development.

Distin’s instrument catalogue of 1857

Henry Distin’s entrepreneurial success with the instrument manufacturing firm was immense, and by 1857 the company was thriving; so well, in fact that he procured additional, adjacent premises at 9,

Great Newport Street, Long Acre London⁴⁴ (although Horwood puts the date as 1859), increased his work force, and published a *Complete Catalogue of Military Musical Instruments*.⁴⁵

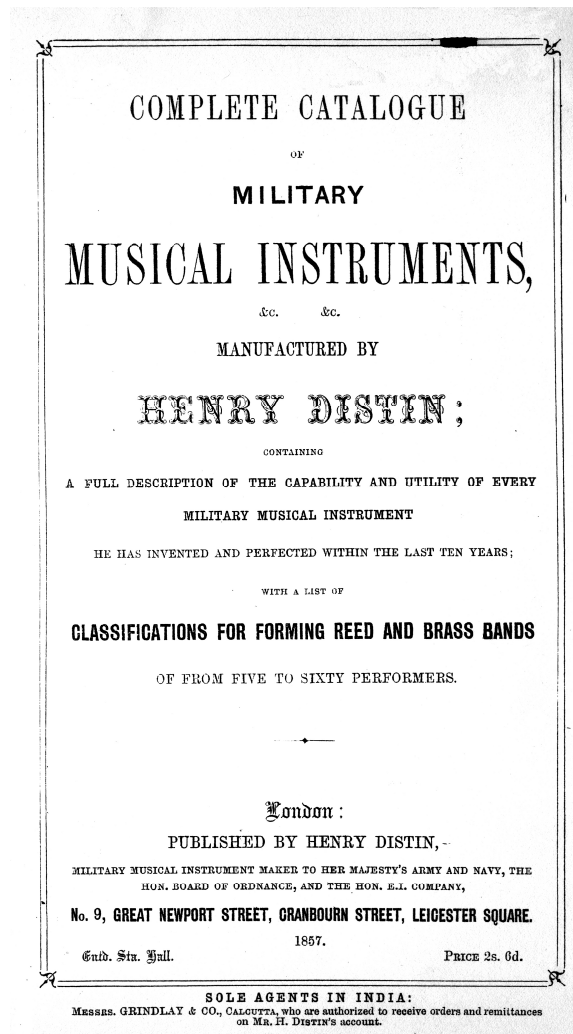


Figure 50: Complete Catalogue of Military Musical Instruments 1857
Source: National Library of Scotland

The contents of the catalogue not only show many important developments in instrumental design but also contain a long list of commendations from satisfied customers. The former Distin premises of 31, Cranbourn Street, Leicester Square were retained as a Music Warehouse⁴⁶ until 1859, when they were given up and the new premises were expanded in 1862 and again in 1866.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

⁴⁵ See Appendix C: Distin's 'Complete Catalogue of Military Musical Instruments' 1857.

⁴⁶ *The Era*, November 4th 1849.

⁴⁷ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed March 27th 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.



Figure 51: Distin factories at the Cranbourn and Great Newport Street premises.
Source: National Library of Scotland



Figure 52: Distin factories at the Cranbourn and Great Newport Street premises.
Source: National Library of Scotland

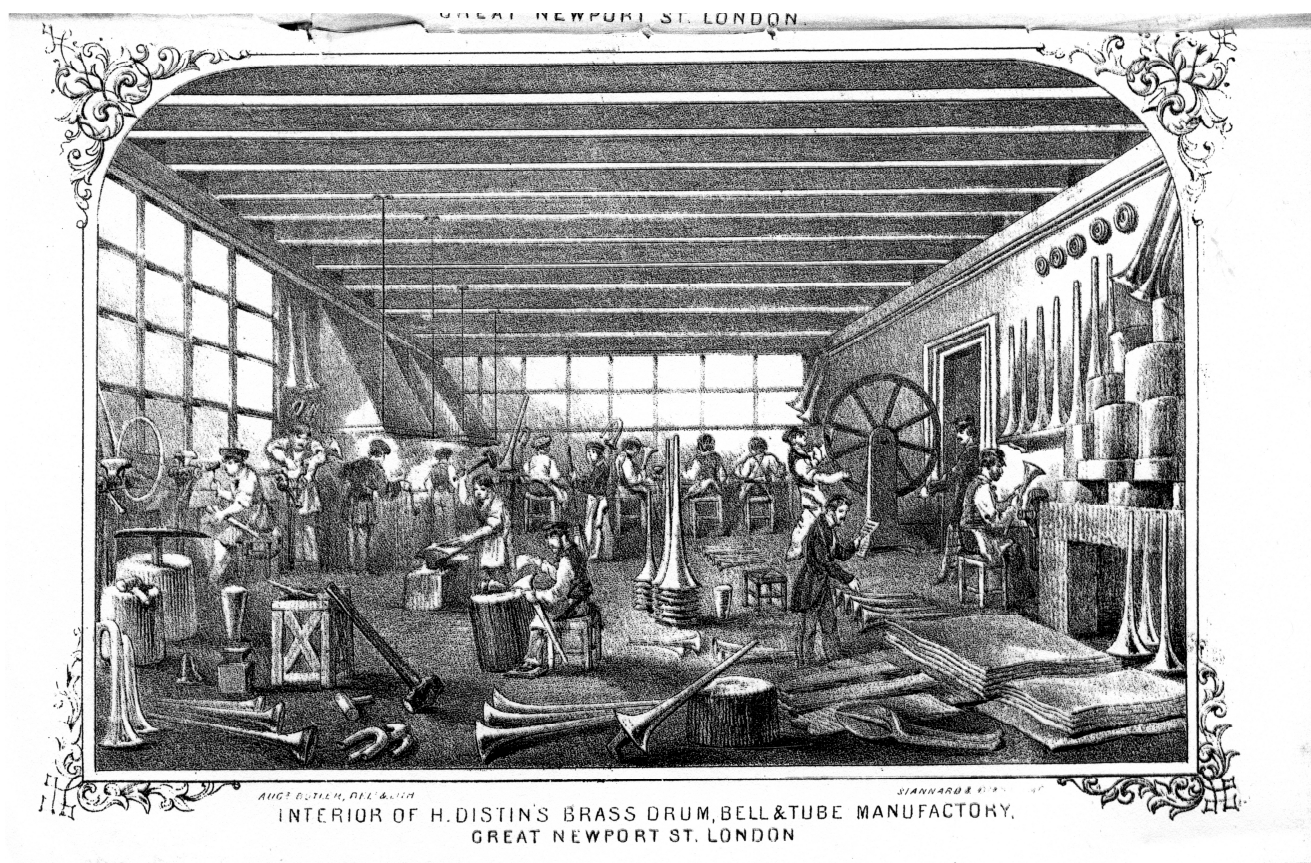


Figure 53: Distin factories at the Cranbourn and Great Newport Street premises.
Source: National Library of Scotland

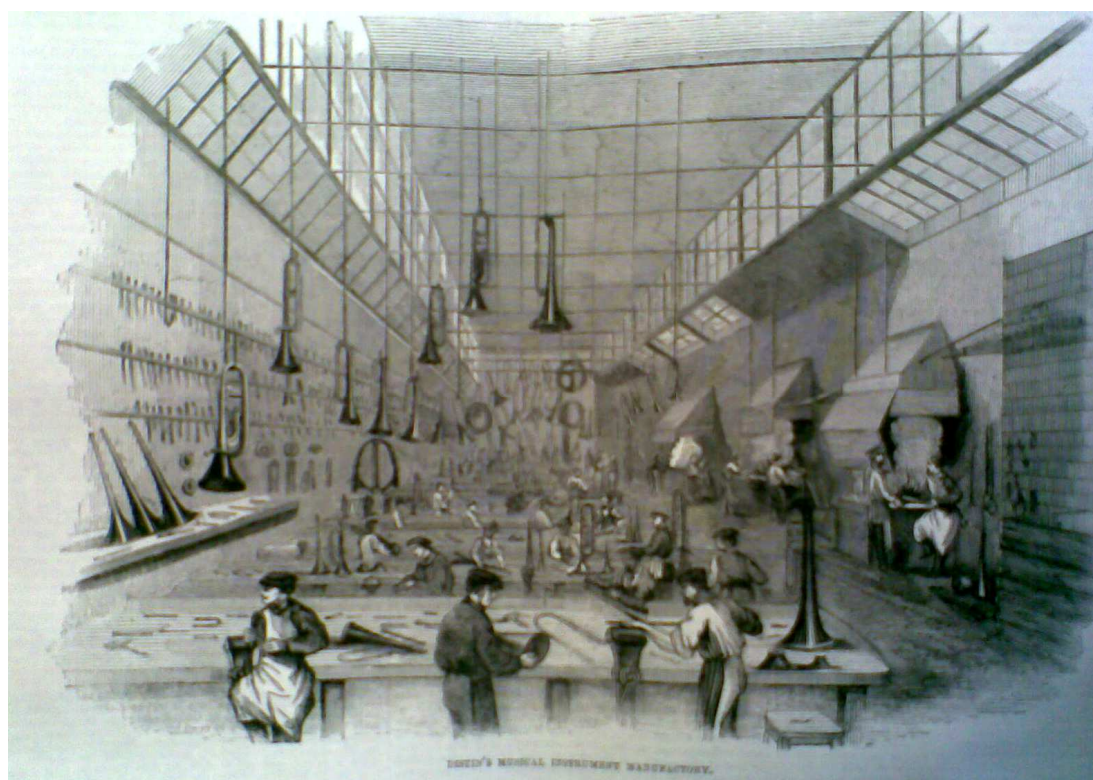


Figure 54: Distin factories at the Cranbourn and Great Newport Street premises.
Source: National Library of Scotland

Besides the list of satisfied customers, the 1857 catalogue also gives evidence of important connections with clients and influential people such as Robert Crawshay, the founder of the remarkable Cyfarthfa brass band in South Wales, who wrote to Henry Distin in 1860:

January 12, 1860

H. Distin, Leicester Sq.

I send you today a box containing a Contra-Bass Instrument of your make which I thank you to repair and return as soon as you possibly can

Robert Crawshay

pp. William Jones⁴⁸

Henry Distin's brass instrument manufacturing company was prospering, despite enormous competition, during the 1860s, however, while the company was indisputably successful, Henry Distin probably never actually made a brass instrument. Distin's success with the company came from his innovation, his 'excellent judgement',⁴⁹ and the quality of his instruments which was comparable to, if not better than, his competitors and most authorities agree that as a manufacturer, Distin improved brass instrument design and mechanism and the tools of their construction.⁵⁰ His chief assistants in manufacturing instruments were William Hillyard from Dublin⁵¹ (for the period of 1854 - 1862c), Dupont and later as the company expanded, Barnes, Bauer, Cook, Hoyer, Korb, Kurzendorfer and Mackay.⁵² The company produced thousands of instruments covering a huge range of types and categories from woodwind, brass, strings and percussion to concertinas and also developed its music publishing (see Chapter 7 on the Distins as publishers). By 1862 Henry Distin's Company had grown to fifty workers⁵³ and by 1864 had increased to eighty-five; a growth described as 'phenomenal',⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Herbert, Trevor, and Myers, Arnold, 'Instruments of the Cyfarthfa Band' *The Galpin Society Journal* (October 1988).

⁴⁹ Farrar, L. P. and Myers, A. *Henry John Distin*, Paper given at the Galpin Society Conference on Musical Instruments, Oxford, London and Edinburgh, 7th August 2003.

⁵⁰ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27th March 2008).

⁵¹ Schwartz, Richard, 'The Cornet Compendium', See the website:

<http://www.angelfire.com/music2/thecornetcompendium>

⁵² Mitroulia, Eugenia and Myers, Arnold, 'The Distin Family as Instrument Makers and Dealers 1845-1874'. *Scottish Music Review*, Vol. 2, No 1 (2011).

⁵³ Rose, Algernon, *Talks with Bandsmen* (London: Bingham, 1895), p.223.

and at the London International Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace in April 1862 Henry Distin's exhibition stand was larger than any other musical manufacturer, and included a pair of silver kettledrums, a colossal Eb contrabass and his monster gong drum (shown later). The size of Distin's exhibition was gently ridiculed in the *Punch* magazine with this cartoon:



Figure 55: Cartoon ridiculing the size of Distin's stand at the London International Exhibition
Source: *Punch* magazine April 1862

Distin was allotted a larger space for his trade stands than any other musical instrument manufacturer and drew the comment, 'his display [was] proportionately more extensive and brilliant'.⁵⁵ At the exhibition, Henry Distin was awarded a medal for 'good quality of his several brass instruments',⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

⁵⁵ *Bristol Mercury*, April 26th 1862.

⁵⁶ *The Musical Standard*, December 1862, p. 132.



Figure 56: Illustration showing a medal presented to Distin
Source: *The Musical Standard*, December 1862

and while *Cassell's Illustrated Exhibitor* described the trade stand as: 'Mr. Distin's Sax Horns', no saxhorns were mentioned and only images of a Koenig horn, a saxophone, a cornet and a ventril horn were illustrated. The Cassell's report on the Distin trade-stand, although not verified, is very complimentary:

One of the largest and perhaps best show-cases in the Exhibition of Art and Industry is that of Messrs. H. Distin and Co., of Great Newport Street, Leicester Square. In it may be seen some of the finest specimens of brass and silver instruments exhibited by the British manufacturer. Some very highly-finished specimens of the Koenig horn, the saxophone, the cornet, and the ventril horn are placed in this case; which instruments we are induced to illustrate, and to state that their prices are more moderate than any instruments of the kind we have yet seen.⁵⁷

Distin's ambition and determination was rewarded in 1867 with a prize medal for the 'excellence and improvements to valved instruments',⁵⁸ at the World Exposition (Exposition Universelle) in Paris⁵⁹ which was said to have been visited by more than nine million people.

⁵⁷ Cassell. *Illustrated Exhibition of 1862* (London: Cassell, Peter, & Galpin, 1862).

⁵⁸ *The British Bandsman*, March 1889.

⁵⁹ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27 March 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com>

Distin's euphonic horns and ventil horns

From 1851 we see, on posters of Distin performances, that the saxhorn name begins to take a subordinate role with names such as ventil horns, euphonic horns, tubas, ballad horns, tenor horns, etc.: 'their improved Silver Sax Horns, also on their Newly Invented Euphonic Horns, for the First Time In This Town'.⁶⁰ In fact the Distins performed on these euphonic horns in a string of performances in Penzance and London during this period: 'Mr Distin and sons will have the honour of ...introducing, for the first time in London, their newly invented Euphonic Horns'.⁶¹ According to Horwood⁶² the euphonic horns were a variation of valved bugles, but no examples of these instruments can be found and there are no pictures or designs, but it appears that these instruments were 'invented' and manufactured by Henry Distin in 1851, just one year after he took over the firm. During this time the Distin Family brass ensemble introduced into its performances these 'newly invented'⁶³ euphonic horns which were said to have been a product of Henry Distin's instrument manufacturing company, however, it is my contention that these instruments were not invented by Distin at all, but imported saxhorns which Distin stamped and re-named euphonic horns; but this is conjecture.

The next type of brass instruments to appear from the Distin Company was a family of ventil horns⁶⁴ which were developed from the earlier ventil cornet and ventil trombone. These had been advertised in February 1848 as: 'Distin's new Ventil Cornet'⁶⁵ and: 'Distins' Ventil Trombones'.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ *Penzance Gazette*, September 10th 1851.

⁶¹ *The Times*, July 4th 1851, p.1.

⁶² Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.34.

⁶³ *Penzance Gazette*, September 10th 1851.

⁶⁴ Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970), p.29.

⁶⁵ *The Times*, February 9th and 11th 1848, p.1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, February 24th 1848, p.1.



Figure 57: Soprano ventil cornet/horn
Source: Belonging to the author

However, while the Distin Company is claiming the ventil cornet and the ventil trombone as its own creation they had not, at that stage, begun manufacturing instruments, therefore Distin must have been importing these instruments and stamping them as his own. Unfortunately, these ventil trombones cannot be traced but some examples of the ventil *horns*, which were built in a complete range of sizes and pitches are still around.



Figure 58: Eb Ventil Horn
Source: Durham University Antique Brass Instrument Collection

Although ventril horns do not appear in the Distin Musical Instrument Catalogue of 1857 they are shown advertised in the Distin Brass Band Journal of 1869 (shown below) with the following description: 'A very pleasing effect is produced by small brass bands composed of Distin and Co.'s Ventil Horns exclusively. They are all made upon the circular model. The Ventil horn has a mellow, rich tone similar to a flugel horn'.⁶⁷

DISTIN & CO'S BRASS BAND INSTRUMENTS.
Manufactory: Gt. Newport Street, London, W.C.





Valve Trumpet. Ventil Horn. Alto or Flugelhorn

DISTIN & CO.,
Military Musical Instrument Manufacturers,
List of Prices of Instruments suitable for Amateur and Volunteer Bands.

The Equisonant Pistons have an equal bore throughout, consequently Instruments with these Pistons possess an evenness and an equality of tone that cannot be produced upon Instruments with the ordinary Pistons.

CORNETS-A-PISTONS.			VENTIL HORNS.		
No.		£ s. d.		Ordinary Pistons.	Equisonant Pistons.
1	ORDINARY CORNET, in B flat ...	1 5 0	27	SOPRANO, in E flat and D flat, three Valves ...	4 0 0
2	Ditto superior model ...	1 15 0	28	ALTO B flat ditto	4 10 0
N.B. The above two Cornets are of French manufacture.			29	TENOR E flat ditto	5 0 0
3	CORNET-A-PISTONS, new model ...	3 3 0	30	BARITONE B flat ditto	5 10 0
4	Ditto with reversed bell ...	3 10 0	31	BASS ditto	6 0 0
4A	Ditto ditto and ...	4 4 0	32	Ditto ditto four Valves	7 0 0
5	Equisonant Pistons ...	4 4 0	A very pleasing effect is produced by small Brass Bands, composed of Distin & Co.'s Ventil Horns exclusively. They are all made upon the Circular Model similar to the drawing on the other side of this Wrapper. The Ventil Horn has a mellow rich tone similar to the Flugel Horn.		
6	Ditto with double slide ...	3 10 0			
7	Ditto superior model ditto ...	4 0 0			
8	Ditto bell ...	5 0 0			
For particulars of Cornets, with Patent Light Valves and Equisonant Pistons, see separate list, which can be had on application.			BUGLES AND TRUMPETS		

Figure 59: From the Distin Brass Band Journal of 1869

Source: British Library

VENTIL HORNS

27	SOPRANO	Eb	Three valves
28	ALTO	Bb	Three valves
29	TENOR	Eb	Three valves
30	BARITONE	Bb	Three valves
31	BASS	Bb	Three valves
32	BASS	Bb	Four valves

⁶⁷ From the Distin Brass Band Journal of 1869.

The Distin ventil horns were popular for a while with bands as a result of performances by the Distin Ventil Horn Union, but what exactly is a ventil horn? As the experienced collector, maker and historian John Webb says, ‘conclusive and categorical nomenclature of conical brass instruments in the nineteenth century is impossible.’⁶⁸ Makers invented their own names for things. Sax was the first to produce a family of semi-conical brass; saxhorns, that's the generic term, and ventil horns are basically saxhorns.’⁶⁹ However, Sax gets no credit for the new ventil horn design and Distin failed to register the patent (which was unfortunate and ironic, given its relative success). While nomenclature for early brass instruments is widely accepted as being confused, it seems that Distin added greatly to the perplexity and the name *saxhorn* became a generic term as well as a specific instrument name: ‘It is likely that Distin's considerable influence lies behind many of the terms which are now common for brass instruments in Britain’.⁷⁰

Distin's bugles

In 1852 (April 30th) Distin's company was still based at 31, Cranbourn Street, London⁷¹ and is proclaimed ‘Military Musical Instrument Maker’ and ‘Instrument Maker to Her Majesty's Army and Navy’⁷² an affiliation to royalty which was probably self-appointed. However, not long afterwards, on June 9th 1855, Distin received an important commission from the Board of Ordnance for ‘instruments in general use in the British Army’ and so Distin benefited (just as Adolphe sax did from the French Military orders for instruments) as a result of this commission worth many thousands of pounds. The order was for a valve attachment to regular service bugles making them fully chromatic, and on June 26th 1855, Henry Distin took out a patent (BP# 1465) on it.

⁶⁸ Webb, John, ‘Notes on the Ballad Horn’, *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 37, (March 1984), pp.57-61.

⁶⁹ Webb, John, in an email September 2007.

⁷⁰ Bate, Philip / Herbert, Trevor / Myers, Arnold. ‘Saxhorn’, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed October 4th 2006).

⁷¹ *Liverpool Mercury*, April 30th 1852.

⁷² Langwill, Lyndesay, *An Index of Musical Wind-Instrument Makers* (London: Bingham, 1960).

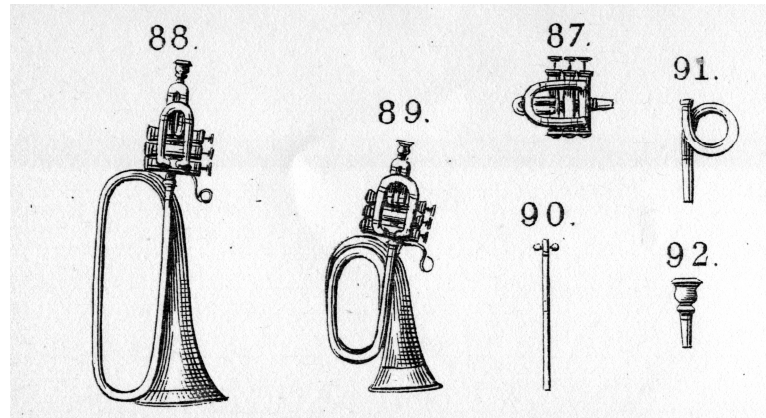


Figure 60: Distin valve attachment
Source: National Library of Scotland

The attachment was adopted by the Board of Ordnance, and ordered for general use in the British Army from June 9th 1855 and consequently this order would have been extremely beneficial to the Distin Company financially, considering the great number of bugles required in the military. Orders of this kind were a key aspect to the success of Distin's company as the *Cassell's Illustrated Exhibitor* explains:

The proprietors of the large manufactory whence these beautiful horns and other brass instruments come have carried modern improvements to such perfection, that they have been honoured by a recommendation from his Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, expressed in circular memorandum to the army at home and abroad, relating chiefly to a very valuable invention, called 'Distin's Patent Chromatic Attachment,' by which the ordinary field bugle can instantaneously be converted into a soft-toned, pleasing instrument, possessing all the variety of the cornet-à-piston.⁷³

⁷³ Cassell. *Illustrated Exhibition of 1862* (London: Cassell, Peter, & Galpin, 1862).

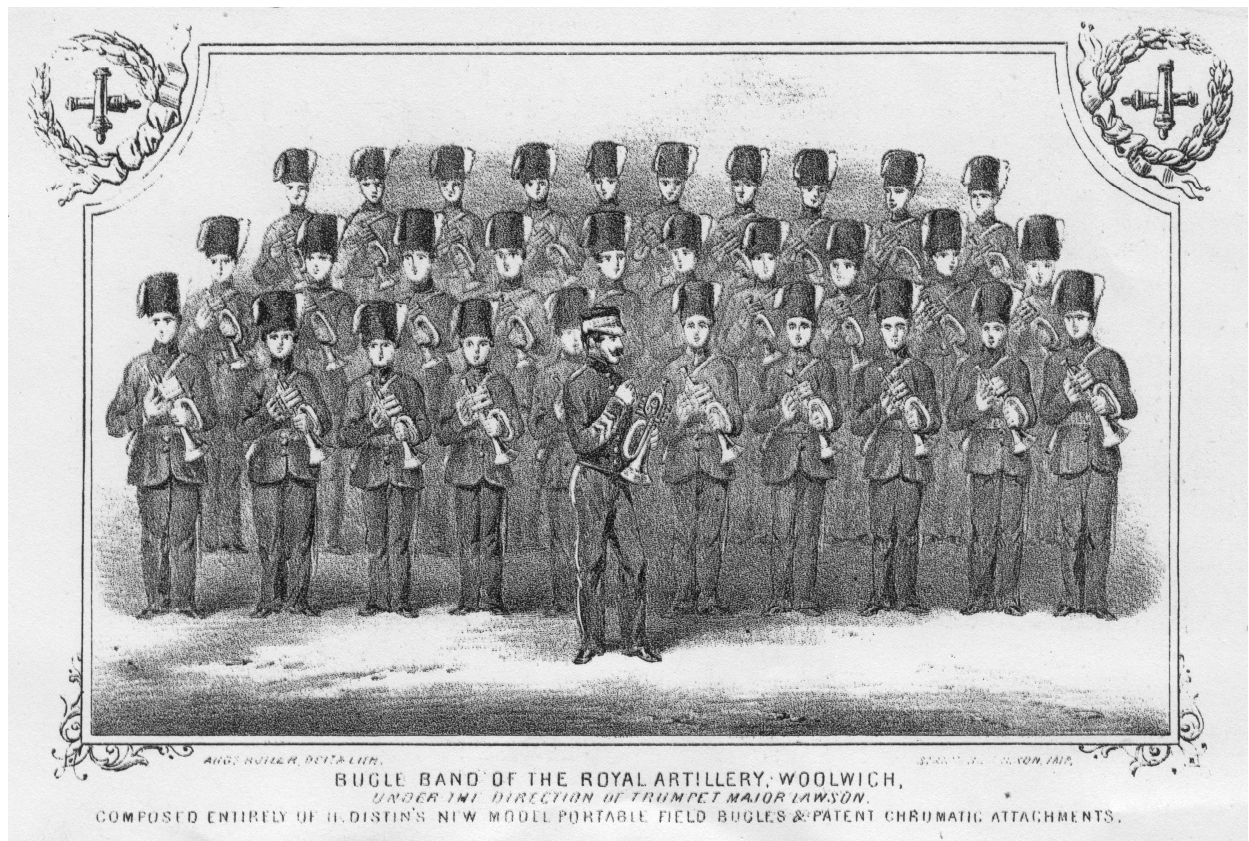


Figure 61: A corps of buglers seen with Distin's valve attachment

Source: National Library of Scotland

However, the design of the attachment is not at all similar to one made by Adolphe Sax in 1849 as suggested by Mitroulia and Myers (HBJ Vol. 20 2008)

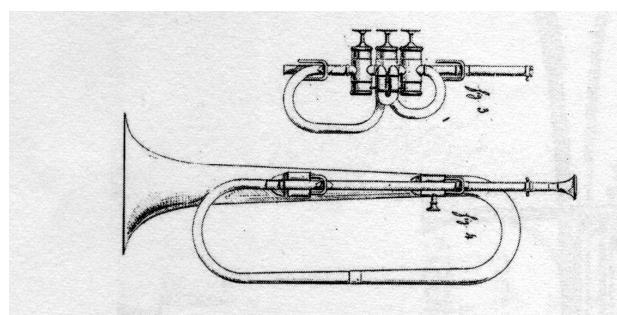


Figure 62: Sax valve attachment

Source: Mitroulia and Myers HBJ Vol. 20 2008

On 14th October 1861, Henry Distin registered a patent for a ‘combination bugle/trumpet’ (#2559), which was described as, ‘another addition to the design of the bugle to simulate the sound of a trumpet. My improvements thus form a bugle and trumpet in one instrument.’⁷⁴

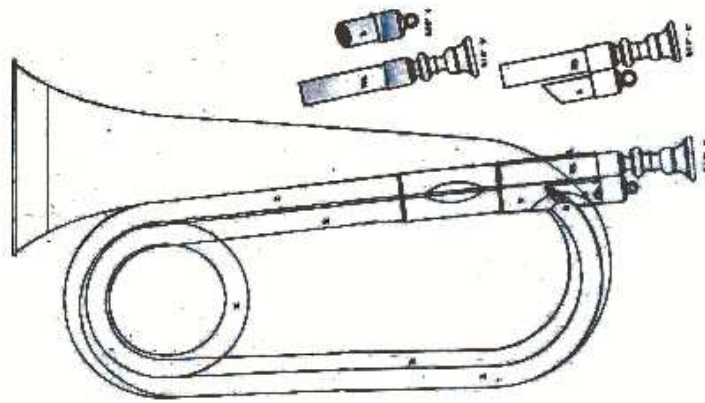


Figure 63: Distin combination bugle/trumpet
Source: British Library

While Sax invented something similar, Distin’s innovation has no characteristics which may be considered similar.

Distin’s cornets

Some of the instruments in the 1857 catalogue were, for various reasons, not taken up by bands or musicians and became obscure, but others became very popular and in fact, look remarkably similar to today’s designs:



Figure 64: A Distin cornet made in 1862 and a Boosey and Hawkes Cornet made c2000
Source: Belonging to the author

⁷⁴ Distin, Henry, Written comment in the Patent description book British Library (accessed 2007).

As mentioned earlier, the cornet was invented circa 1820, and when it arrived in Britain, around 1833, transformed community bands, and quite quickly replaced the keyed bugle which had previously been used as the melodic brass instrument in the soprano register. Sax's contralto saxhorn came around 1844, but the cornet was too well established and loved by bandsmen to be replaced. Distin produced both cornets and saxhorns in his factory, but when orders for cornets increased he set about improving and developing the instrument, and did so with significant success. In 1854, Henry Distin patented an 'Artiste's Cornet à Pistons' (GB #3577) and following that came another new model called the 'Distin Cornet' (GB #19173), both registered from the Cranbourn Street factory. William Distin registered a patent on November 28th 1855 (#2688) with 'a partly rotary action to pistons' on cornets and 'other wind musical instruments' and in 1856 (19th November) Henry Distin registered new improvements to the cornet (GB #2729) which added a clapper key for making trills (see Appendix D).

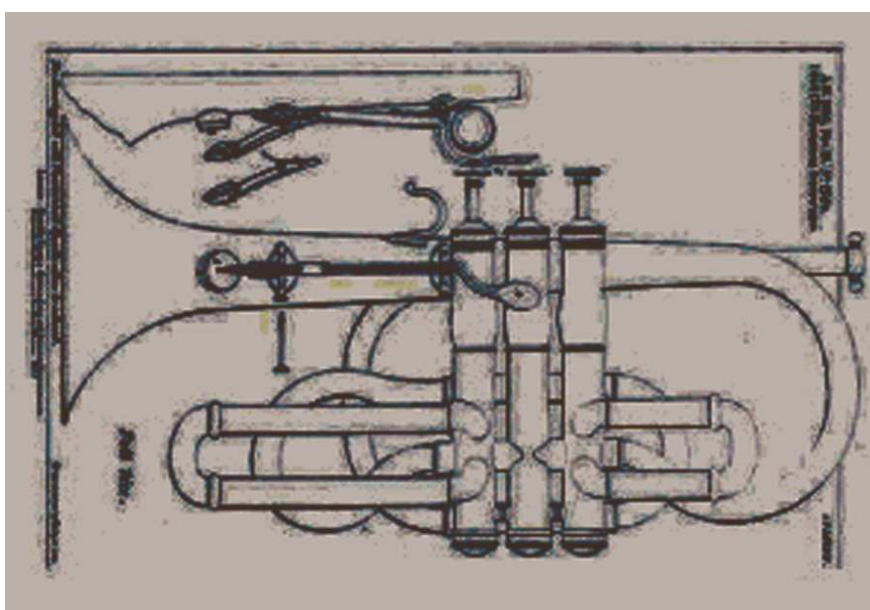


Figure 65: A Distin cornet with clapper key
Source: British Library

The clapper key had been around for many years and even John Distin added one to his bugle as early as 1815 when he played with the Grenadier Guard's Band, therefore the reason that the Patent office accepted this new application is not clear. Perhaps the clapper key had never been registered before and Henry Distin took the opportunity to do so.

Distin's cornet of 1856 (GB #2790) was superseded by a new model cornet on July 30th 1864 when he patented a new style cornet with 'light piston valves' (GB #1896). This new valve system earned much success and was eventually copied by very many makers, but while Distin registered the patent and took the credit for the design, it was, in fact, invented by an employee, Eugene Dupont. Distin's claim to ownership of various inventions appears to lie both outside and inside his manufacturing company.⁷⁵ The light valves, combined with equisonant pistons, which had an equal bore throughout, and consequently these instruments reputedly, possessed an evenness of tone quality, 'which cannot be reproduced by instruments with ordinary pistons.'⁷⁶ The light piston valves utilised a new arrangement of the spring in the piston action which made it much quieter than it had been previously, and because these valves were endorsed by the great Jules Levy, Henry Distin gained significant kudos: 'Her Majesty's Theatre- Rivi re's celebrated orchestra will include M. Levy, the most wonderful performer on the cornet in the world or ever known, who will perform on Distin's celebrated patent light-valved instruments, at the Bal D'Opera on Monday next'.⁷⁷ An alliance with, and commendation from, such an established artist as Levy, was valuable to Henry Distin and of great benefit to his company and the 'light piston valve' became the prototype for the modern cornet valve. Brass instrumental development, at this time, was spurred on by the remarkable virtuosity of a few individual performers, like Levy, who went on to become professional soloists earning an extraordinary reputation. Jules Levy (born in London on April 24th 1838) became a world-renowned cornet soloist, described as 'the greatest cornet player in the world'⁷⁸ and Henry Distin, being a shrewd businessman, capitalized on his fortuitous relationship with the famous artist. From 1867 Levy was persuaded to play and endorse Distin's instruments, in particular the light-valved cornet.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Woodcroft, B. *Patents for Inventions: Abridgments of Specifications Relating to Music and Musical Instruments 1694-1866 - Office of the Commissioners of Patents for Inventions, London, 1871* (London: Tony Bingham, 1984).

⁷⁶ Scott, Jack. *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

⁷⁷ *The Daily Telegraph*, February 23rd 1867.

⁷⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*, February 27th 1867.

⁷⁹ *The Daily Telegraph*, March 4th 1867.



Figure 66: Jules Levy c1880. 'The most wonderful performer on the cornet in the world or ever known'⁸⁰
Source: Wikipedia

Following the light-valved instruments, Distin's 'centre bore cornet' (patented in 1884) had a design which freed the flow of air from abrupt bends in the tubing, and this became the standard of excellence in brass instrumental design.

Distin's flugelhorns

In August of 1854, Distin is credited as inventing the flugelhorn: 'Mr. Distin's newly-invented instrument the flugelhorn- this invention is an important step in the progress of instrumental music'.⁸¹ However, this may be simply propaganda for the activities of the newly formed Distin band, the Flugel Horn union (see chapter 5).

⁸⁰ *The Daily Telegraph* February and March 1867.

⁸¹ *John Bull Newspaper*, August 5th 1854.

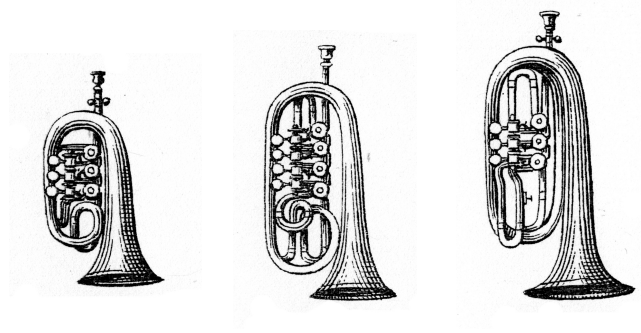


Figure 67: Distin's flugelhorns from 1857. Soprano in Eb, Alto in Bb, & Tenor in F
Source: National Library of Scotland

While the larger flugelhorns were not generally taken up the mezzo-soprano flugelhorn is an essential component in today's brass bands, and has been so since the standardization of brass bands around 1860, but Distin did not invent the flugelhorn; it had been around for many years in some form or other, but innovatively he took the establish idea of a valved bugle, and developed it to a stage where he claimed the family of instruments as his own.

Distin's ballad horns

After Distin's ventral horns (mentioned earlier) came three instruments, which enjoyed limited success; the Koenig horn, the tenor cor, and the ballad horn with its upward facing bell. Langwill says: 'around 1870, Distin 'invented' the Ballad Horn, a circular instrument in C. Its purpose was to enable amateurs to play directly from the voice part of songs without transposing',⁸² and Anthony Baines also gives credit to Distin for the invention of the ballad horn.

⁸² Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

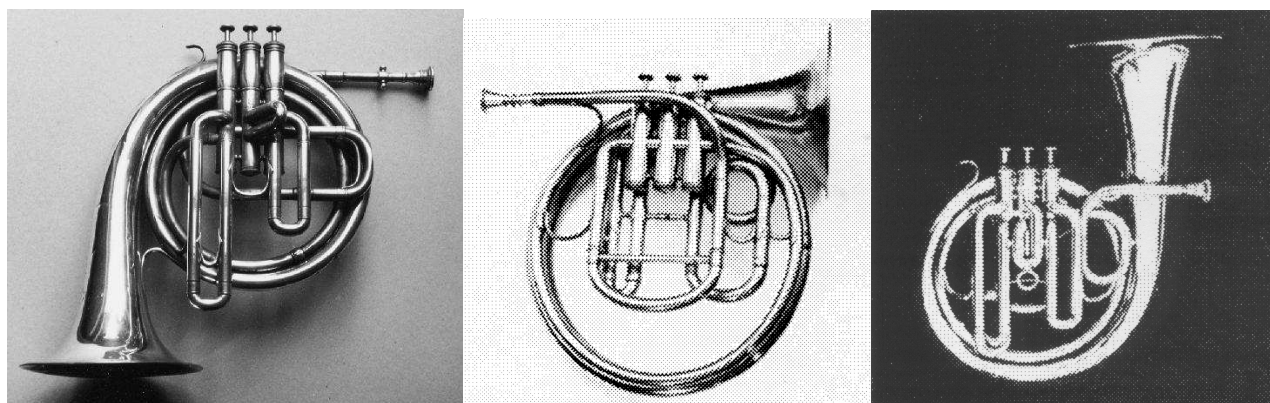


Figure 68: The Koenig horn, the tenor cor and the ballad horn

Source: John Webb, *Notes on the Ballad Horn*, *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 37. (Mar., 1984).

The Koenig horn, the tenor cor and the ballad horn were designed by Distin just prior to selling his business in 1868. However, Webb maintains⁸³ that the ballad horn was introduced by Distin as early as 1856 and later branded by Boosey. My own view is that the ballad horn originally formed part of the ventril horn family in 1851, as the similarities are so striking. The instrument was in the tenor register and with its three valves and conical bore gave a soft tone which appealed to a large public. However, while the instrument was comparatively easy to play- much easier than the French horn- it never found its way into the brass band,⁸⁴ which had developed a preference for the saxhorn range. By the 1870s several other makers, including Brown, Besson, Boosey, Rudall, Carte and Co., Courtois and Conn were producing these instruments, always in circular form, some with their bells up and some with bells down, and others with a forward facing bell as shown.

Henry Distin also made, and played, a remarkable alto horn, which had seven distinctive bells and cost £400 to make. The appearance was said to resemble a 'stag's head.' Adolph Sax had made a similar instrument in 1851 however; Henry Distin added an 'echo bell' attachment and probably used it as a novelty to draw attention to his range of instruments.

⁸³ Webb, John, 'Notes on the Ballad Horn', *The Galpin Society Journal*, Vol. 37, (March 1984), pp.57-61.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*,

Distin's euphoniums

By 1860 the make-up of a brass band was becoming more and more established as a combination of cornets, trombones and saxhorns, and Distin was able to supply these in great numbers. However, Distin avoided the name Sax and supplied instruments to brass bands which he called tenor horns, baritones, euphoniums and basses, and these names (not 'saxhorn') are still used today. The euphonium plays a particularly important role in the brass band, and its origin and acceptance is partly due to Distin. As mentioned earlier the Distin Family introduced into its performances of 1851 the 'newly invented'⁸⁵ euphonic horns and while these instruments cannot be found, naming these instrument 'euphonic' is highly significant when we consider the origins of the euphonium, and there are several claims to the instrument's ancestry. Sax built his Bb *saxhorn basse* in 1843 and this is thought, by many, to be the forerunner of the euphonium.

⁸⁵ *Penzance Gazette*, September 10th 1851.



Figure 69: Bass saxhorn or saxhorn basse in Bb 1843
Source: Horn-u-copia website

By coincidence Ferdinand Sommer, a Weimar bandmaster, developed an instrument around the same time of the bass saxhorn's creation, which he called a Sommerophone, euphonion or euphonic horn. Sommer performed on the instrument (which was constructed by Franz Bock of Vienna and patented in 1844) at the aforementioned Crystal Palace Great Exhibition of 1851.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Bevan, Clifford. *The Tuba Family* (Winchester, Piccolo Press, 2000).



Figure 70: Ferdinand Sommer performing at the Crystal Palace Great Exhibition of 1851 on his sommerophone (also called euphonion and euphonic horn)

Source: Victoria and Albert Museum

Henry Distin claimed the instrument as his own, and included it in his Instrument Catalogue of 1857.

45.

45	3A	BASS EUPHONION in B flat, 4 Rotary-action Cylinders - - - - -	16 16 0
(As performed on by the celebrated Herr Sommer, at the Crystal Palace, in 1851, and known as the "Sommerophone." This is a very superior Bass Solo Instrument, having great facility of execution.)			

Figure 71: Sommerphone in the Distin Instrument Catalogue of 1857

Source: National Library of Scotland

Distin used the name ‘bass euphonion’ for Sommer’s instrument and reproductions quickly established themselves as essential part of the make-up of the brass band. But even before Sommer’s instrument came to Britain, Distin was advertising a euphonium (with ‘um’) in his 1851 brochure, seen above, and is described as ‘Patented Euphonium in Eb’. This was a larger version of the one played by Sommer in 1851, which was pitched in Bb. With all the confusion over the names of brass instruments, and even their functions, Distin could easily have offered his tenor horns, euphoniums and tubas etc to customers in substitution for orders of saxhorns, as happened with the Mossley Band’s order in the same year (see 6.5).

Distin’s centre-bell instruments

From the Blackwell database on Patents at the British Library (number 2017) we find that Henry Distin designed and patented (September 6th 1858) a new range of brass instruments called, ‘Distin’s patent centre-bell instruments’. These so called ‘improvements’ were applied to instruments in the soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, bass, contrabass, and double contrabass registers, and also ‘other musical wind instruments of a similar class’ (see Appendix D).

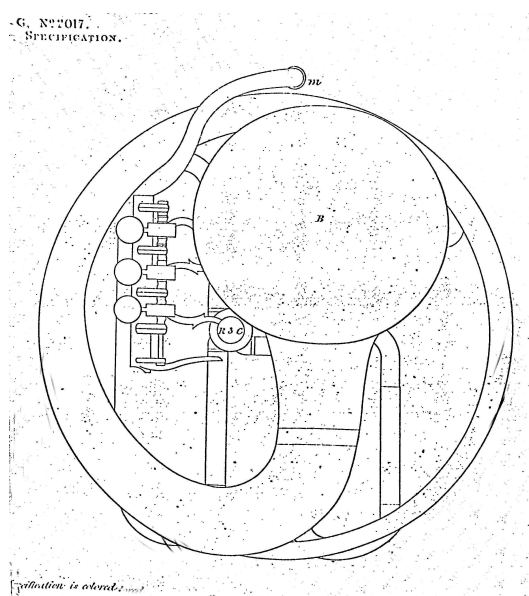


Figure 72: Distin’s designs for Centre-bell brass instruments
Source: British Library

While this 'centre-bell' design was intended for a whole range of sizes, it is generally believed that the instruments were never built, although the cartoon of Henry Distin playing one of these instruments suggests that at least one model was made.



Figure 73: A Cartoon of Henry Distin with his centre-bell brass instrument
Source: British Library

Also, from a band picture of Sidmouth Town Band taken in 1862, the seated musician appears to be holding one:



Figure 74: Musician in Sidmouth Town Band holding a centre-bell brass instrument. 1862
Source: Hailstone, Alf, *The British Bandsman Centenary Book*, (Hertford: Egon 1987)

Scott maintains that Distin's ventril horns followed the unsuccessful centre-bell instruments⁸⁷ but the evidence shows that the centre-bell instruments were designed in 1858 and the ventril horns were produced and used in performances in 1851

⁸⁷ Scott, Jack, *The Evolution of the Brass Band and its Repertoire in Northern England* (Thesis submitted to University of Sheffield 1970).

Distin's tubas

Looking for names for his instruments to replace the Sax name, Distin came up with several ideas, and for upright bell instruments he initially used the name *tuba* and applied it to a whole family of instruments. Distin's low register instruments were also called variously: bass, contrabass, bombardon, and helicon, circular bass, sonorophone as well as tuba. Today, the tuba is the name of the instrument used in orchestras but the same instrument, played in a brass band, is called a bass and this terminology derives from Distin's nomenclature.

In July 1860 the first National Brass Band Championships was held at the Crystal Palace, London (see Chapter 8 on contests) and Henry Distin presented the winning band (Black Dyke Mills) with a 'champion contre-bass in Eb value £35 guineas'



Figure 75: Black Dyke Mills Band with contrabasses (1861)

Source: Newsome, Roy, *150 Golden Years- The History of Black Dyke Band*, (London: WOB Pub. 2005)

To draw attention to the company and gain maximum publicity for his sponsorship, Henry Distin wandered around the Crystal Palace grounds (mentioned earlier) playing his contrabass, and he also made similar presentations at the subsequent Crystal Palace Band Contests of 1861, 1862 and 1863.

(see Chapter 8). The striking visual impact of the colossal tuba (shown below) was also effective in drawing attention to Distin's range of products.

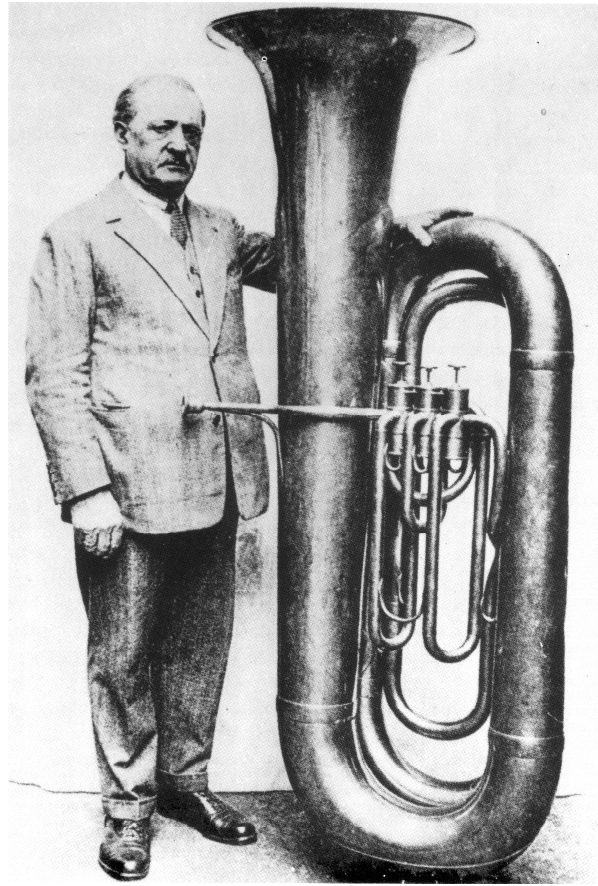


Figure 76: Henry Distin with his monster contrabass

Source: Horwood, Wally, Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy (Herts.: Egon Pub. 1992)

Distin's percussion

While the Distin focus for manufacturing had been initially, on brass instruments, the production of other instruments, particularly percussion instruments, became an important part of the firm's operation. This new initiative came about from a special order from the professional band at the Crystal Palace in May 1854 to supply them with a new set of drums.⁸⁸ Also in 1854 (27th May), Henry Distin took out a patent on 'drums for musical purposes' (Patent 1178) and this was a system or 'mode' of supporting and keeping side drums in the required position when in use:

⁸⁸ *The Era*, May 14th 1854.

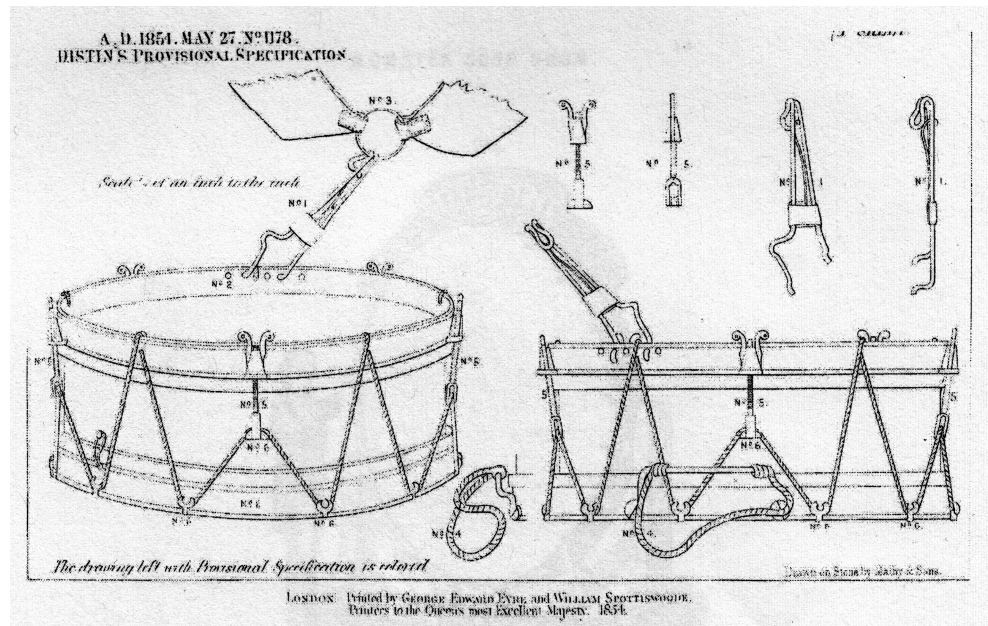


Figure 77: Distin's designs for 'drums for musical purposes' (Patent 1178)
Source: British Library

Distin also received a prestigious commission from the 3rd Light Dragoons in 1856 to make a pair of silver kettle drums:

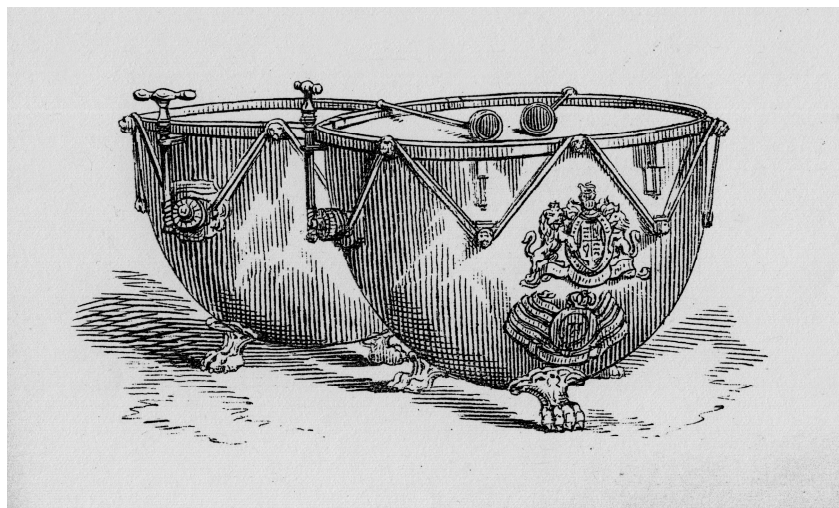


Figure 78: Distin's Kettle Drums made in 1856 of solid silver
Source: National Library of Scotland

Mitroulia and Myers claim that Henry Distin's registration for a 'means of regulating the tone of kettle drums' did not reach its final stage. However, the Blackwell database in the British Library gives the registration number as #2310 and dates it as October 2nd 1856, and they are shown in the Distin catalogue of 1857:

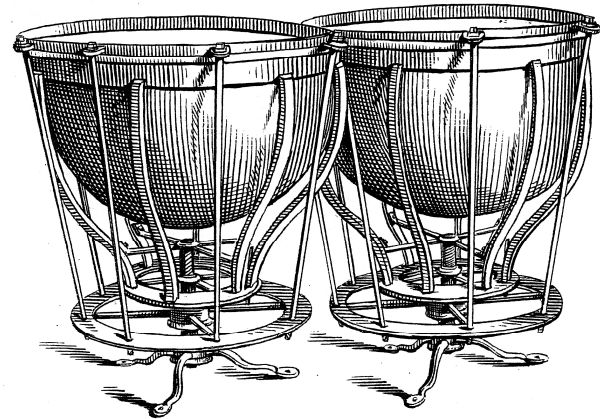
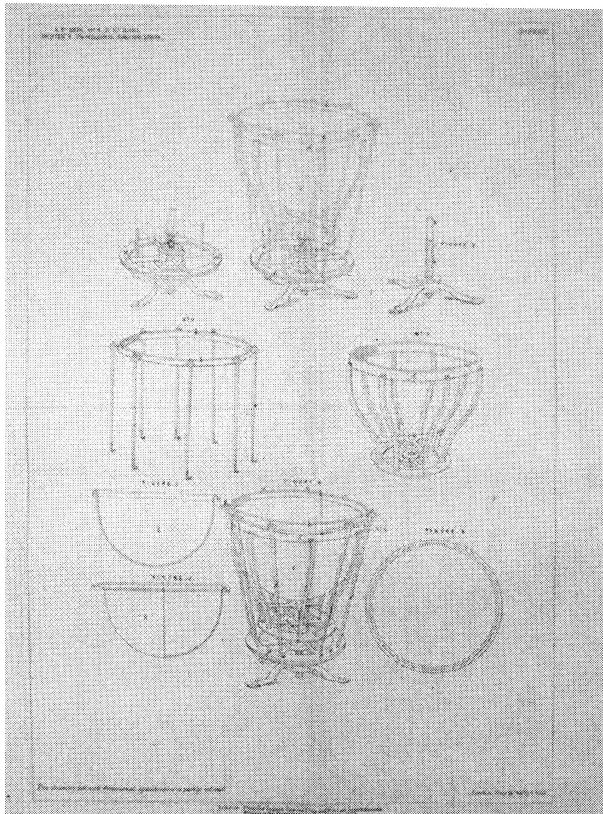


Figure 79: Distin's designs for tuning Kettle Drums
Source: British Library and National Library of Scotland

These pitch-adjustable 'kettle drums' gave previously hand tuned timpani a facility for fast changes of pitch and more precise intonation. This was an innovation which gives Henry Distin enormous kudos in the history of instrumental development, but which is generally unrecognised today. However; timpani were not introduced into brass bands until around 1930.

The various expansions to the Distin manufacturing business gave Henry Distin an opportunity to develop new designs of instruments, especially those with larger dimensions, and so for the great Handel Festival held at the Crystal Palaces in June 1857, Henry Distin accepted a commission to make a huge bass drum which caused a stir in the musical world:

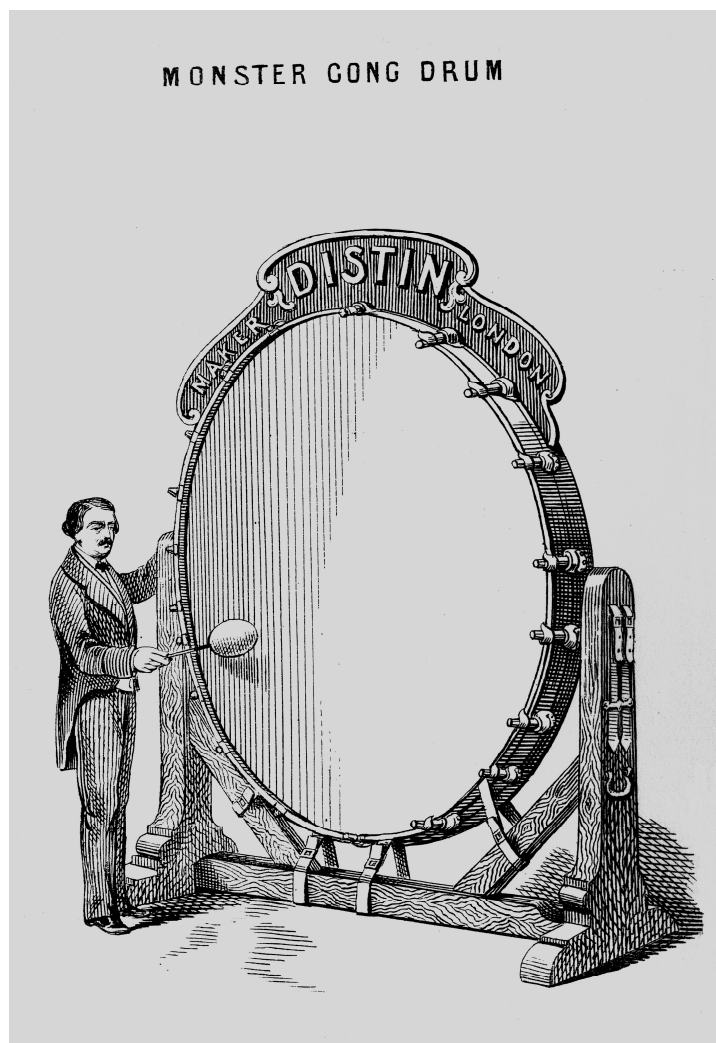


Figure 80: Henry Distin with his Monster Gong Drum also called a Leviathan Drum.

Source: Illustrated London News, June 1857

Consequently, with such prestigious orders coming in, Distin's instrument manufacturing company grew in status, and his reputation as an outstanding supplier of high quality brass instruments had a strong appeal to the brass band fraternity; a fraternity which was ambitious and eager to achieve high standards in performance. The Distins took out nineteen patents for improvements in the design and manufacture of instruments, including several for percussion instruments and their accessories⁸⁹ and many of these were advertised in the Distin catalogue of 1857 which contains, not only brass instruments but a whole range of various instruments, including flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, saxophones, cymbals, metronomes, violins, pianos, and a range of percussion instruments. Some of

⁸⁹ Eliason, R. and Farrar, L. P. 'Distin', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 27 March 2008), <http://www.grovemusic.com>

which, like the gong drum, became prominent features of orchestras and bands as a result of Distin's effective promotion and publicity. The large, unusual instruments, such as the monster gong drum and timpani, attracted particular attention;⁹⁰ consequently, with the huge range of instruments and the importance of some of the innovations made by Distin, we get a clearer impression of the size and importance of the operation. These aspects, and many more, combined to influence not just the growing brass band movement, but the whole music life of nineteenth-century Britain.

Distin metronomes

In 1860 (November 8th) Henry Distin registered a patent for a metronome (#2749) which gave further diversity to his output. The metronome was originally invented in Amsterdam by Dietrich Nikolaus Winkel in 1812; however, Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (or Mälzel) copied Winkel's ideas, improved them, and then patented his version in 1816. While the metronome was not a new invention, Distin saw an opportunity for entrepreneurial development, market expansion and innovation.

Distin's company sale

On June 19th 1868 Distin and Co. was sold to Boosey and Co. Instrument Company for £9,700 but continued production as Distin and Co. until 1874 when the Distin name was dropped. The sale of the Distin Company was conditional on Henry Distin agreeing not to manufacture under his own name within 100 miles of London.⁹¹

An appraisal of the work of the Distins reveals a commitment to innovation and a pursuit for excellence in all that they did, but their efforts are particularly distinguished within the field of brass instrumental design and craftsmanship. Innovation is the useful application of new inventions or discoveries⁹² and the Distins were highly successful with the practical application of their ideas and products. The Distins, as innovators, contributed to brass band development in several ways but the

⁹⁰ *The Era*, June 19th 1859.

⁹¹ *Distin and Co. 1868-1874: workshop order books and stock books*. (London: Record Reference A227. NRA catalogue reference: NRA 44592).

⁹² McKeown, Max. *The Truth About Innovation*. (London: Prentice Hall, 2008) [ISBN 0273719122](#).

most significant was in instrument manufacturing and sales, and owning the largest instrument manufacturing company in Britain, Distins became leaders in the industry.

Distins, Mossley Temperance Brass Band and the ventril horn

There is a case to be made that it was Distin and not Sax who created the brass band as we know it, and that it was Distin's modification and mass manufacture of the saxhorn as the ventril horn that was the significant factor in the development of the standardised format of the modern band. I offer the following case in support of this claim:

The Mossley Temperance Band was formed in 1841, and in 1853 caused a sensation by winning the first Belle Vue (now the British Open) Championship contest, which was held on Holiday Monday 5th September 1853 as 'A Grand Musical Contest'. This was, perhaps, *the* most important event in the brass band history until this time, being the first national event for brass bands. The owner of Belle Vue Gardens, John Jennison collaborated with James Melling in the promotion and organisation of the event and engaged three respected professional musicians as judges: Mr Oakden (bandmaster of the 1st Royal Dragoons, Manchester), Mr. Ellwood (bandmaster to the Earl of Ellesmere) and Mr. Dowling (bandmaster of the 81st Regiment) and 16,000 people were reported to have attended the day's event. According to Horwood, Mossley Temperance Band had been in contact with Distin and Sons with a view to ordering a set of 'twelve valved Sax Bugle Horns'⁹³ but we know that they received, instead, nine upright bell instruments, in Ab and Db, on which the band gave its winning performance. At the contest there were eight entries, and Mossley was drawn to play first, but unfortunately they arrived late (travelling by wagonette) and the contest had started without them. Controversially they were allowed to play last and subsequently won the contest playing the *Hallelujah Chorus* by Handel and one other piece. (The 2nd place went to Dewsbury Band, 3rd to Bramley Temperance and 4th place to Bury Borough.) At the time of the first Belle Vue contest there were nine players and a conductor in the Mossley Temperance Band and they played on a set of

⁹³ Horwood, Wally, *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy* (Hertford: Egon Pub. 1992), p.33.

homogeneous instruments supplied by Henry Distin, which caught the ear of the adjudicators. These instruments were all upright versions of the generically named saxhorns, and because of this success, other bands followed suit by incorporating saxhorns into their bands. However, Schwartz maintains that the instruments were *built* by the Distin Company as ‘ventil horns’⁹⁴ and not simply supplied by Distins as saxhorns (or the ambiguous order from Mossley of ‘sax bugle horns’), and this issue becomes critical when an examination of the genesis of brass bands is made.

The quintessence of the modern brass band sound has long been accepted as originating from the saxhorn family of instruments. Sax’s instruments appealed for their homogeneity, efficiency in performance, quality of workmanship, etc and these instruments had been infiltrating bands in England (and in Europe) from their creation in 1844, when the Distin Family adopted them, but it is possible that when Mossley Temperance Band won the first Belle Vue Contest in 1853 they were actually playing on instruments made and ‘invented’ by Henry Distin. The word ‘invented’ is used loosely here because the copying of designs and patents was rife for the first half of the nineteenth century. From *The Reporter* newspaper article of August 31st 1935 we learn more about the Mossley Temperance Band and its musicians.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Schwartz, Richard, ‘The Cornet Compendium’, See the website:
<http://www.angelfire.com/music2/thecornetcompendium>.

⁹⁵ *The Reporter*, August 31st 1935.

MOSSLEY TEMPERANCE BAND. Winners of First Belle Vue Band Contest in 1853

Shades of 1853!
Reconstructed on the Belle Vue Stadium according to a scenario prepared by Mr. John F. Russell, librarian of the Henry Watson Music Library, the B.B.C. are to-morrow (Sunday) and on Friday evening next reproducing the first championship brass band contest held at Belle Vue 83 years ago.

And successors of the first winners are to take part! The winners of the first contest were the Mossley Temperance Band, and their successors, the Mossley Borough Prize Band, have been engaged to participate in the reconstruction programme. Mossley Band will broadcast from 5-30 to 6-15 p.m. to-morrow, and also next Friday evening.

Owing to the limited time which the B.B.C. can allow for the reconstruction programme, it will be impossible for the Mossley Band to play each selection fully, and, therefore, they will give abridged selections, each piece lasting about four minutes.

For many years bands taking part in the Belle Vue contest were permitted to play pieces of their own selection in addition to the set test piece. At the first contest two "own choice" pieces were allowed, and Mossley Temperance Band is reported to have impressed the judge by their rendering of the "Hallelujah Chorus," from Handel's "Messiah." Six or seven bands competed, and the result was:—

1. Mossley Temperance.
2. Dewsbury.
3. Bramley Temperance.
4. Bury Borough.

THE PROGRAMME.
The B.B.C. are anxious that at least three of the original test pieces should be played, and the Mossley Borough Band will to-morrow play excerpts from "William Tell," "Tancredi," "Hallelujah Chorus" (Handel), "The Heavens are Telling" (Haydn), "Lucrezia Borgia," and Anna Bolini."

It is noteworthy that in 1853 the Mossley Temperance Band contained only ten players, for at that time there were no rules governing the number of players. The band was established in 1841, and, though it changed its name, the Mossley Borough Band is definitely the same band. It has been reorganised several times, and at present has headquarters at the Town Hall, with the Mayor (Councillor H. Laming), president; and Councillors Major R. B. Glover and S. Whitehead and Mr. L. Rawson, trustees. The band is supported entirely by public subscription.

The history of the Mossley Band does not appear to have been written up, but the "Reporter" has been able to glean some interesting information about the ten men who so many decades ago brought honour to the town and about some of their successors.

60 YEARS FOLLOWER OF THE BAND.
Mr. George Frost, tobacconist, of Stamford-street, who has followed the fortunes of the Mossley Band for over 60 years, remembers all the men who took part in the first Belle Vue contest, and when the "Reporter" showed him their photographs he immediately recognised them.

In a chat with a "Reporter" representative, Mr. Frost revealed that nearly all the men who won at Belle Vue in 1853 were employed in local cotton or woollen mills. William Taylor, the conductor, said Mr. Frost, was a spinner at Robert Shaw Buckley's mill, and in addition to conducting the Mossley Band he also acted as conductor to a band at Linthwaite.

Julius Schofield, the solo baritone, was a painter and for a time went to live in Scotland. John Rhodes, the second baritone, was bookkeeper at Scout Mill, while Robert Schofield, bombardon, was employed at C. Kershaw's Valley Mill, Brookbottom.

James Sykes (bombardon) was a spinner at Kershaw's Mill. Richard Fawcett, solo horn, was a noted player, and eventually went to London; Joseph Robinson, solo cornet, was a joiner, and from Mossley went to Oldham, where he became conductor of the Oldham Rifles Band. "That is the reason he is wearing a rifleman's hat," explained Mr. Frost.

THE COTTON PANIC.
John Meakin, second horn, was a spinner. He was father of the late Mr. Meakin, of Lorne-street, an old Mossley Rugby footballer, and grandfather of Mr. F. Meakin, a member of the Mossley A.F.C. Committee. William Fielding, second cornet, carried on business as a pork butcher in Stamford-road, while Samuel Taylor, solo euphonium (brother of the conductor), was a woollen weaver at premises in Wyre-street.

Mr. Frost related how, during the cotton panic of the early '60s several members of the Mossley Band turned their musical abilities to account to support themselves and their families. James Sykes, Roger Fawcett, John Meakin, and Samuel Taylor, all went away and accepted engagements in various places.

Mr. Frost related that about 30 years ago, when Mr. Fawcett was buried in St. George's Parish Church graveyard, a man arrived in Mossley to attend the funeral. He said he had come from London, that he had played with Mr. Fawcett in the same band there, and that he had never heard Mr. Fawcett's equal as a musician.

At one time the band practised in an upper room at Baguley, but for many years their headquarters were at the Old House at Home, Lees-road. Afterwards they went to the clubhouse in Waterton-lane, now the Mossley Bowling Club.

ALEX. OWEN AS CONDUCTOR.
Mr. Alex. Owen took charge of the band at one period. Mr. Frost recalls that in 1881, under Mr. Owen's conductorship, the band entered for three contests. At Rayton they tied with Littleborough for third and fourth prizes; at Northenden they won the first prize; and at Boushurst they captured the second prize.

The following year, at Trawden, near Colne, the band won the premier award. The band won many contests, and one piece with which they achieved quite a number of successes was entitled "Knight of the Road." It was a quickstep march, and it is said that no band could play it as well as the Mossley Band.

The next time Mossley Band won the Belle Vue contest—in 1897—is an occasion within the memory of a large number of Mossley people. They played "Moses in Egypt," waltz conducted by Mr. Alex. Owen, and gained all possible marks—a remarkable achievement.

Noted players who have figured with the Mossley Band include the late Herbert (Tib) Scott, the well-known euphoniumist, and J. F. Carter, also a noted euphoniumist, who acted as conductor for about ten years.

PRACTISING AT 4 a.m.
Two daughters of the late Samuel Taylor are living in Seel-street, in Mrs. Gee and her sister, Miss Taylor. They told the "Reporter" that their father afterwards became attached to the orchestra of a travelling circus, and for some years travelled the country with the circus. William Taylor, the conductor of the band, was their uncle. They have no recollection of the first contest at Belle Vue—it was before their time—but they have vivid memories of the band in subsequent years; how the men would begin practising at 4 a.m., and how their father used to act in the capacity of a "knocker-up" with a clothes prop to get some of the more sound sleepers to the practices.

On Tuesday evening the band had a practice at the Yorkshire Ward Conservative Club preparatory to their engagements with the B.B.C., to which they are looking forward with great interest.

In addition to the pieces mentioned above, the band will also play excerpts from "Semiramide" (Rossini) and "Moses in Egypt." Further practices will take place at Yorkshire Ward Conservative Club to-night (Friday) at 7-45, and on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock. Several members of the Boushurst and Dobcross Bands, who received their training at Mossley, will take part with the Mossley Band in the broadcast.

THEY COULDN'T RESIST PLAYING.
A good story is told of the Mossley Temperance Band's return after their success in the first contest at Belle Vue. The band, it is stated, went to Belle Vue by wagonette, and news of their success reached the town in the evening, causing a large crowd to assemble at the station to give them a rousing welcome.

Time passed, however, but the band did not put in an appearance, and when the midnight hour had long since chimed, the people, tired of waiting, wended their way to their homes. So when the members of the band arrived in Mossley in the "wee sma' hours" there was nobody to greet them.

Anxious not to disturb the slumbers of the townspeople, the bandmates decided to proceed to their homes as quietly as possible, and on alighting from the wagonette they removed their shoes and walked up Stamford-road in their stockinged feet.

But the temptation was too great. The bandmen were intoxicated with success, and long before they had reached the top of Stamford-road they had struck up one of their favourite tunes, regardless of the slumbers of the inhabitants.

William Taylor - Conductor
Roger Fawcett - Solo Horn
Joseph Robinson - Solo Cornet
William Fielding - 2nd Cornet
Julius Schofield - Solo Baritone
James Sykes - Bombardon
Robert Schofield - Bombardon
Samuel Taylor - Solo Euphonium
John Rhodes - 2nd Baritone

Mossley Band Belle Vue Winners

1853

Figure 81: Article on Mossley Temperance Band
Source: *The Reporter*, August 31st 1935

Significantly, the *The Reporter* of 1935 makes no mention of saxhorns.

The original band had only ten players, at the time no standards had been defined for instruments and it was not unusual to see instruments such as Ophicleides, Sackbuts and Serpents. At the time of the first Belle Vue contest there were 9 players and a conductor. There were eight entries, and Mossley was drawn number one, yet at the start of the contest, the band was nowhere to be found, and the contest started without them. When they finally arrived, they were allowed to play last band - not something today's organizers would allow. Playing 'Hallelujah Chorus' and other selections they were placed first, with Dewsbury second, Bramley Temperance third, and Bury Borough fourth.⁹⁶

Walter Ainscough⁹⁷, curator of the Brass Band Archive in Wigan, maintains that Mossley played 'The Heavens are Telling' from Haydn's *Creation* in addition to Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* and states that the band arrived deliberately late, not wanting to play first. While these claims cannot be supported by available evidence, it is clear that the winning band at Belle Vue in 1853 played on upright versions of saxhorns as supplied by Henry Distin as 'ventil horns', and this impacted on the whole brass band movement. The ventil horns, with their matched and homogeneous sound, found favour not only with the judges on that day but with a receptive audience, and so a demand grew for this new kind of instrument and timbre. It is my contention, therefore, that these nine instruments used by Mossley were Distin's ventil horns as used in the Distin Ventil Horn Union of 1859 and not Sax's saxhorns and if correct, the great British band tradition owes more to Distin than is generally accepted.

We know that Mossley Temperance Band, despite its win, decided to change its set of Ab/Db instruments in favour of a set of Bb/Eb instruments, which became the preferred pitches by contest organisers just a few years later in 1855, and the set of nine upright bell instruments were returned to Distin and Son. Only a few years later, on October 5th 1859, the Daily Telegraph advertises

⁹⁶ From the Mossley Band web site: www.mossleyband.co.uk/

⁹⁷ In conversation at the Brass Band Archive September 18th 2009.

performances of the Distin Ventil Horn Union in Weston's Grand Music Hall⁹⁸ (see chapter 5 for more on the Ventil Horn performances). It is possible that Henry Distin could not sell this set of returned instruments once the rules for competitions became more and more established and he saw an opportunity to capitalise on Mossley's success and exploit the potential of the ventil horn instruments. Distin was still producing these ventil horns as can be seen in the advertisement above, in 1869⁹⁹ in a range of sizes and pitches, from: Eb soprano, Bb alto, Eb tenor and Bb baritone and Bb bass, but the instrument design and name was not widely taken up by brass bands probably because of the firmly established reputation of Sax and his instruments. However, despite the non-acceptance of the ventil horn, Henry Distin continued to produce and promote his version of the saxhorn in typical innovative, entrepreneurial style using names such as tubas and horns.

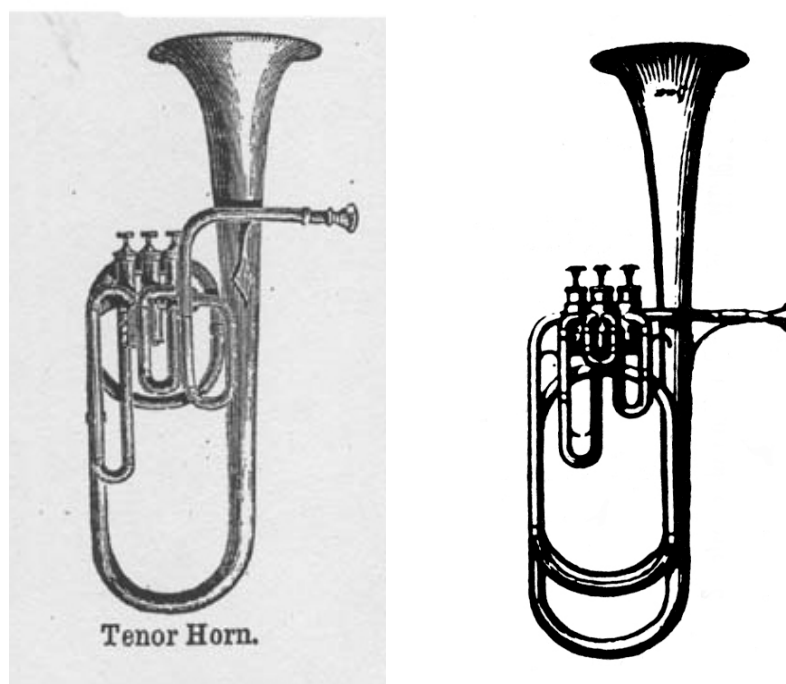


Figure 82: Distin's tenor horn Eb (1869) and Sax's alto saxhorn Eb (1862)

Sources: *Distin advertisement* and *Wally Horwood, Adolphe Sax 1814-1894 His life and Legacy*

The success of this type of horn was sealed when the Mossley Temperance Band won the 1853 Belle Vue contest, performing on a complete set of instruments supplied by Distin and thus inspired

⁹⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*, October 5th 1859.

⁹⁹ See Appendix C *Distin's Instrument Catalogue* 1869.

other bands to begin the process of conversion.¹⁰⁰ This musical sensation¹⁰¹ contributed significantly to the spread of the all-brass band'.¹⁰² The instruments shown above are virtually the same as each other, despite the suggested difference in pitch (alto-tenor), and are still used in today's brass band. Henry Distin's nomenclature became established in preference to that of Sax, and the instrument, today, is known as a tenor horn.

Conclusions

The success of the Distins within the field of instrumental manufacturing has been shown to have been enormous, and this achievement impacted the whole brass band movement despite intense competition from other manufacturers. Their success was due in part to the fine reputation the Distin Family brass ensemble had accrued following thousands of concert performances around the world, and also to their personal skills and talents. My research reveals an initial curiosity towards the design of their own instruments which developed into driving ambition to be innovative in the creation, development and promotion of new instruments. Their entrepreneurial skills, seen so clearly in the activities of the brass ensemble, combined with their innovation and business acumen, helped to establish their position as leaders in the field of brass instrumental manufacturing.

The Distin commitment to innovation and a pursuit for excellence in brass instrumental design and craftsmanship may have been driven by the motivation of capitalism but at the same time a quest for artistic distinction may be seen. The success of the Distin Family, in performance as well as in the business of manufacturing, was also due, in part, to their innate competitive nature and all these values were passed on to a developing brass band community.

Besides the personality traits mentioned, one of the strongest attributes of the Distins was their promotional style, and although, by today's code of conduct, their approach seems boastful and exaggerated there is no evidence of a negative reaction: Quite the contrary; the audiences and paying

¹⁰⁰ Russell, Dave, *Popular Music in Britain 1840-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.218.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, Arthur, *Brass Bands* (Hertford: Granada Pub. Ltd., 1979), p.40.

¹⁰² Newsome, Roy, *Brass Roots* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p.32.

public responded positively to the Distin style of promotion and their esteem was enormous as we see from the various articles and letters of commendation shown in Appendix A.¹⁰³

The Distin Family retail business started as an instrument depot mainly to act as a distributor for musical instruments sent over from Sax in Paris, but when Henry Distin took control in 1849, instrumental manufacturing followed and developed rapidly. Henry Distin, with his shrewd eye on the demands of a quickly expanding market, made several innovative strategies which benefitted the company and raised the profile of the Distin Family reputation. With an astute vision for commercial growth and a perceptive view on the developing brass band movement, he created a powerful position of influence and with a large catalogue of instruments, made to the highest standards, created a market which appealed to bands and musicians throughout Britain. The manufacturing company became the largest in the country and was sold in 1868 to Boosey who maintained and developed the business having benefitted from the Distin legacy. Such a huge business concern was remarkable for the time and had considerable effect on a developing brass band movement. The Distin Family ‘indeed influenced greatly the world of instrument manufacture and the explosive growth of brass bands during their lifetime.’¹⁰⁴

Subsequent chapters show further aspects to the Distin’s contribution to brass band development besides instrumental manufacturing.

¹⁰³ *The Illustrated News of the World*, June 15th 1861.

¹⁰⁴ Farrar, L. P. and Myers, A. *Henry John Distin*, Paper given at the Galpin Society Conference on Musical Instruments, Oxford, London and Edinburgh, August 7th 2003.